



AMAZON PRIME

Barbara Land is an RAD ballet teacher and a renowned anthropologist, meeting shamans in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, and teaching ballet as she goes.
Deirdre Kelly meets a woman on a mission.



Into the jungle...
Photos: courtesy
Barbara Land



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Barbara Land is a dancer turned ethnochoreologist – a kind of anthropologist of dance – who teaches ballet in remote villages in the Amazonian jungle while recording the stories of the world’s last remaining shamans. And that’s just for starters.

In Reno, the fully certified Royal Academy of Dance teacher runs her own dance school when not choreographing for the Nevada Opera Company or the Conservatory Dance Theatre (she is artistic director), among other local arts institutions. In her spare time (ha!), she gives free dance lessons to children in foster care as well as to children with special needs in the local school system. Recently, the married mother of four expanded her community-oriented dance programmes, under her own charitable foundation, to include war veterans and senior citizens. Her car teems with streamers, tutus and dance shoes donated by Bloch in support of the cause. A woman with a mission, as she says herself.

‘I’m not a ballet teacher bunhead,’ says Land matter-of-factly during a recent long distance telephone conversation. She talks a mile a minute, her words coming out in streams and gusts of high-octane energy. Time is of the essence. She has just come home from one of the five weekly private Spanish language classes she takes in preparation for her ongoing work in Peru. In another hour she needs to race back out the door to teach a series of RAD ballet classes over a three-hour period to students ranging from pre-primary to advanced.

Patti Ashby, the RAD’s National Director in the US, says, ‘Barbara’s work has been and continues to be selfless. Her generosity and passion for sharing dance is inspiring.’ You wonder where she gets the energy, and then she tells you. ‘I am a big follower of the Joseph Campbell follow-your-bliss thing,’ Land says. ‘If you listen to what the heart

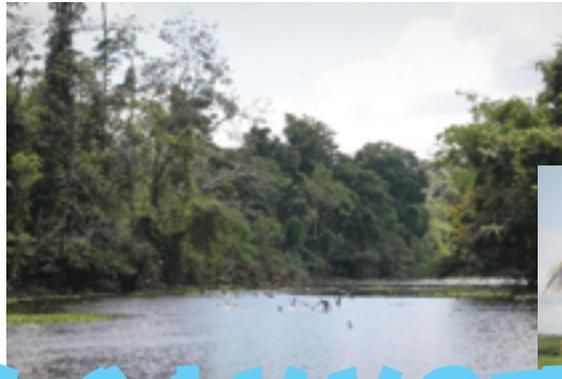
says then what you are doing is not a job, and this is not work for me. It’s who I am. I believe in passing it on.’

Land found her bliss early on, in the ballet studio. The daughter of immigrants from the ex-Yugoslavia who grew up in the American industrial city of Pittsburgh, Land studied dance at Point Park College and later at the Pittsburgh Ballet, the company she eventually joined, rising to the rank of principal dancer. She might still be in Pittsburgh if it weren’t for her first husband, a paediatric specialist who found work in Reno, necessitating a move out of state in the early 1980s.

Formerly known as the divorce capital of the world, thanks to a comparatively skimpy six-week residency requirement that gave couples a quick way out of their unhappy marriages, Reno was not exactly an arts town when Land relocated there nearly three decades ago. The only place offering ballet class was the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), which Land found wanting.

‘It was rubbish. There was nothing and no one here,’ she says. Land knew she could do better, and soon organised a class so superior that the administration asked her to join the faculty. Land said yes but under one condition. She wanted proper training for the job. ‘I was a good ballet dancer but I really didn’t know how to teach, so that’s when I hooked up with the RAD in Reno,’ she says. ‘I needed to learn this syllabus, and the RAD taught me.’ She can’t praise the experience highly enough. ‘I really am the biggest advocate of RAD,’ Land continues. ‘They turned me into the ballet professor I am today. They gave me this structure.’

A founding director of the UNR’s ballet programme, which she helmed for 25 years, Land used that structure to build not just a comprehensive system of dance classes but a list of academic courses not previously taught at the university: dance history, production and criticism, and aesthetics, to name a few. A popular teacher, she



'YOU CANNOT STAND THE DANCE YOU UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE'

also relied on her RAD training to write dance books and teaching manuals for classes of up to 500 students. 'I am a ballet person and an academic,' says Land, a recipient of the State of Nevada Governor's Arts Award in Dance, among other accolades. 'I am interested in the science of dance.' She's also interested in how dance functions as an expression of human culture.

Land learned that first-hand from her professor, the legendary dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku, whose 1970 paper, *An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance*, argued that all dance reflects the values of the culture in which it is produced. Kealiinohomoku, who died in 2015, also took a firm stance against ethnocentrism in dance scholarship of the west, exposing deep-rooted biases that would prioritise an European art form like ballet and pigeonhole dances from other cultures as aesthetically inferior and 'savage' by comparison. 'I still teach her stuff, I am one of the devotees,' Land enthuses. 'I tell my own students, "You cannot understand the dance until you understand the culture." I really believe that.'

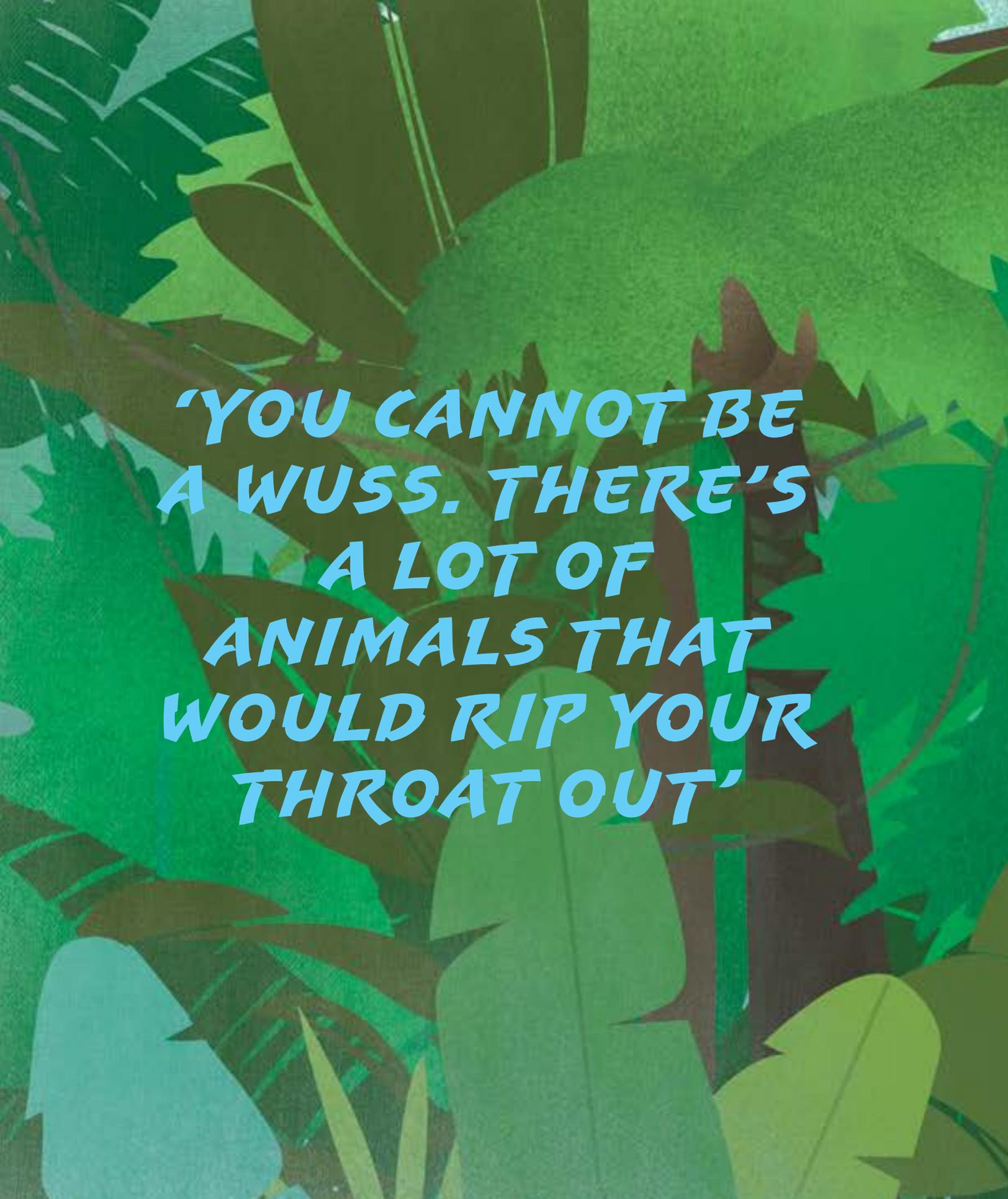
Her own forays beyond the ballet academy lead her first to Haiti where she studied the ecstatic dances of voodoo priests and practitioners. This was large-gestured 'orgiastic dancing,' as Land describes it, with deep African roots. Land traced those roots back to their origin, travelling to study with the Maasai in Kenya. And then it was a matter of: what's next? 'Honestly, I had done it all,' Land says. 'I had seen enough, read enough. I am a scholar and I wanted something else to study, and so I thought of a religious practice that would be the opposite of voodoo,

that would have almost no movement at all. And that's when I thought of the jungle shamans.'

A cross between a doctor and a priest, shamans do ritual healing on behalf of clients who are suffering from an imbalance or loss of the soul. Shamans are believed to have the special ability to contact the spirit world to retrieve lost souls. They are found amongst the indigenous peoples of north and south America. Land first travelled to the Amazon rainforest within Peru in 2007 in hopes of coming into contact with shamans and observing their rituals up close. It wasn't easy. 'The first time I went down I opened the door to my hut and there was a 15-foot snake hanging there. I nearly peed my pants,' she says.

By comparison, the shamans were a whole lot less menacing. They simply turned their backs on her, walking the other way whenever she tried to approach. 'They hoped I'd go away,' she says. But Land refused to take the hint. She recalls one shaman in particular. 'He'd look the other way and then I'd be there. He'd go and come back and I was still there. I kept coming and coming and coming. Eventually he realised I wasn't going anywhere. And now I'm *Barbarita*. I'm their daughter. I've now got three shaman tales that not even the Travel Channel could get. They won't let anyone else even get close.'

You have to imagine Land won them over by sheer dint of her forceful personality. She talks the talk, and walks the walk, through some of the most treacherous terrain on earth. 'You cannot be a wuss and work in the Amazon rainforest,' Land says. 'You are always on high alert, you're almost like an animal, and you have to be careful. There's a lot of crazy animal activity, animals that



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The first RAD class for teachers in Iquitos Photo: Barbara Land



would rip your throat out, especially at night, when the jungle comes alive. It's not a woman's world.'

Her work in the jungle has earned her a place at the Universidad Científica del Perú where she now lectures local anthropology students on the Laban theory of movement 'in hopes of helping them sort out how they are going to write about their near extinct indigenous dances,' Land says. Meanwhile, this summer, Land will spend another 12 days in the Amazon, accompanied by a dozen US anthropology students, to continue her work with the shamans. The latest to grant her his trust is Jorge, a powerful healer whose reputation extends beyond the boundaries of his remote river village. Land plans to film him working with his medicinal plants and record his ritual dances using Laban notation. The resulting research will form the basis of her next book, *In Search of El Tunchi – a Case Study in Religion and Magic*, to be published in 2018.

Publication was originally scheduled for this year but Land has lately been too busy to write, preoccupied with helping the people she came to study. When she returned to Nevada after establishing contact with her first remote Amazon village, El Chino – on the Tahuayo River – she secured funding to build a five-classroom school there, and then spent two summers helping with the construction. Her latest charitable project is Ayacucho Village, located on the Yanayacu River in the Peruvian rainforest, approximately eight hours by speed boat from Iquitos City. With a population of just 185 inhabitants, the village has a kindergarten and primary but no secondary school. 'This is the poorest of the poor,' says Land, who in 2016 founded the Nevada Building Hope Foundation to bring educational services and other humanitarian aid to the region. 'I want to make their lives better.'

The foundation's other goal is to give educational and choreographic support to ballet teachers in the Amazon. Yes. They exist. And well before Land arrived on the scene a decade ago. They introduced themselves after hearing about her work with the shamans. An anthropologist who dances? To the small but dedicated ballet community of Iquitos, it seemed too good to be true.

Patti Ashby had already been following Land's work for some time. 'Then a few years ago, she approached me for advice on how to bring ballet, specifically RAD ballet, to a remote village.' As Land recalls, 'When I met them, they were copying videos off YouTube and trying to perform them. I basically told them, "This is not how ballet is done," and gave them structure where there wasn't any. I also work with teachers on the fundamental principles of ballet, basically how to teach. From nothing we are starting to create something.'

That something includes working with their local dance company and helping them choreograph *The Nutcracker*, a big hit in the rainforest where visions of dancing snowflakes represent something truly exotic. 'This will be the third year putting on the ballet. It is a very simple version and I am good at making people look good,' Land says. 'The 21st century has come to the jungle with the internet. I am trying to help them get it right. They want to do ballet.'